

Democracies with proportional voting systems are ‘good citizens’ in global institutions. So will changing its electoral rules make Britain behave better in international forums?

Some liberal democracies are better international citizens than others. New research by [Stephanie Rickard](#) shows that the more proportional a country's voting system is, the more likely it is to fully honour its international commitments on world trade issues. If the British public approves a shift to Alternative Vote elections in the May 2011 referendum, it may not very visibly improve how the UK operates in international forums. However, UK membership of the European Union, plus the use of PR systems elsewhere (including for a reformed Senate or House of Lords) could strengthen any positive effects.



The best electoral strategy for parties in proportional systems is to appeal to broad segments of the population so as to maximize the party's vote share. By maximizing its vote share, a party maximizes its power in the legislature and also its chances of being in government. And PR systems tend to have much larger electoral districts, electing multiple members of parliament at a time, so that parties no longer have ‘desert regions’ where they elect no MPs. This makes all parties more nationally representative, and in turn means that major parties likely to get into government do not ‘write off’ whole regions or industries or interests where their support is less. All these factors tend to engender greater compliance with international agreements that benefit broad segments of the electorate, such as environmental treaties or multilateral trade rules.

By contrast, in democracies with ‘first-past-the-post’ (FPTP) or other majoritarian electoral rules the contests take place in single-member districts where the top parties are usually trying only to win in marginal seats. And parties win by getting more votes than anyone else rather than gaining local majority support, ([which is getting rarer and rarer in the UK](#)). The main contenders have effectively written off their rival's safe seats and the regions or interests that they include, but are highly beholden to interests in their own safe seats. Hence, non-PR countries are more likely to violate international agreements that benefit broad segments of a country's population, particularly if doing so provides benefits to select groups.

Consider, for example, the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO). This agreement restricts the use of subsidies by member-country governments. Subsidies targeted to individual industries or firms are explicitly banned by Articles 1 through 9. These restrictions are intended to increase economic efficiency and reduce costs to consumers. Consumers benefit from compliance with these rules. However, select segments of the population, such as domestic producers, lose out from compliance. Producers would prefer national government violate this agreement and provide lucrative government subsidies. In other words, non-compliance with this international agreement benefits narrow producer groups; it serves their own self-interest.



Pascal Lamy, Director-General of the WTO - Image Credit: WTO

[My recent research](#) shows clearly that governments elected via majoritarian electoral rules are more likely to be responsive to sectional interests and thus more likely to violate their international agreements. Looking at the behaviour of all the democratic countries in the WTO (and previously GATT, the General Agreement on

Trade and Tariffs) from 1980 to 2003 reveals that governments elected via non-PR electoral rules and/or single-member districts are systematically more likely to violate GATT/WTO agreements than those elected via proportional electoral rules and/or multi-member districts.

In my study period, 95 per cent of the countries in the sample were named as defendants in fewer than three GATT/WTO disputes. Now it is true that in this same period a single non-PR country, the United States, faced an astonishing 32 WTO disputes. And the USA was similarly in a class of its own on environmental and other international issues at this time. However, the effects of electoral systems remains robust in my research even after we exclude the USA as an obvious outlier.

Reforming UK voting

Do these findings have implications for the UK, and especially for the electoral reform referendum in May 2011? Here British voters can choose between keeping FPTP or voting for the reform option of adopting the [Alternative Vote \(AV\)](#), a system where MPs must win local majority support, and that is otherwise used only in Australia.

In my study period, three WTO disputes were filed against Australia alleging the existence of illegal narrow transfers or subsidies. Being filed against 3 times, puts Australia in the top 5 per cent of 'violators'. Until recently Australia was also well-known as a 'Kyoto denier' country, in this period backing US obstructions of new global warming agreements. However, it is important to note that the Alternative Vote system in Australia (and if adopted in the UK) keeps single-member districts. So again the tendencies for parties in Australia to discount broader national interests in favour of its safe regions or industries was still strong at this time.

During 1980-2003, by comparison, the UK with two disputes faced fewer allegations of breaking the WTO rule than Australia, despite using FPTP elections in single member districts. However, in my research membership of the European Union also appears to have a reductive effect on the number of WTO violations – presumably because these types of transfers/subsidies tend to be illegal under EU rules as well. Therefore, European Union countries in the WTO have a double incentive to comply with their obligations – because non-compliance would violate not one but two international agreements.

So, it seems unlikely that simply adopting AV voting and requiring MPs to win local majorities will in itself influence Britain's international behaviours for the better. But existing influences already operate via Britain's EU membership and other constitutional changes are in prospect. The coalition government will shortly announce plans for a reformed House of Lords or Senate that is wholly or predominantly elected using a full proportional representation system. Taken in conjunction with the [UK's long-run transition to a more multi-party system](#), and the other factors above, it seems likely that a change to the Alternative Vote could still help make the UK a better international citizen in future.

For the full analysis on influences on good international citizenship, see

Stephanie J. Rickard, 'Democratic differences: Electoral institutions and compliance with GATT/WTO agreements', *European Journal of International Relations*, published online 19 May 2010. DOI: 10.1177/1354066109346890

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